

Medical History

Brain and Osler: collaboration in 1919

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In 1919 Sir William Osler contributed a chapter on "Medicine and nursing" to a book entitled *Essays on Vocation*.¹ A footnote on the first page states: "This chapter reproduces material scattered through the author's books *Aequanimitas* and *Counsel and Ideals*." Lord Brain had told me that when a student at Oxford he had helped in preparing Osler's chapter. Among Lord Brain's papers, now in the library of the Royal College of Physicians of London, is a reprint of this chapter with the signature of Stella Langdon-Down, his then fiancée, on the cover. Letters to his future father in law, written in 1919, provide some clues as to how the opportunity to help Osler—a somewhat unlikely task for a medical student of a few weeks to undertake—may have come about.

The reprint of the chapter in the Osler Library in Montreal, accessioned by the library in 1934, has an undated note on the title page in the handwriting of W ("Willie") W Francis, Osler's first cousin once removed, later to be the first Osler librarian at McGill University, stating that the selections were compiled by W R Brain (F Wallis, personal communication). Brain's assistance is also recorded in the *Classified and annotated bibliography of Sir William Osler's publications* edited by Maude E Abbot, which also states that he was of New College, Oxford. The source of this additional information, which would have been correct only in 1919, is unclear.²

Distracted historian

Russell Brain returned to New College, Oxford, to study medicine in January 1919 after wartime service in the Friends' Ambulance Unit as a self trained radiographer. He had first gone up to Oxford in October 1914, having been active in raising money for the support of Belgian refugees, thousands of whom had arrived in England after the outbreak of war. He read history in preparation for law, but his continued participation in Belgian relief work in Reading and Oxford and his constitutional incapacity for the factual components of history rather than logical relations, combined with the distractions of the times, resulted in his failing the history preliminary examination. About a week after his return to Oxford in January 1919 he wrote a letter to his future father in law:

New College
Oxford

Jan 18th 1919

Dear Dr Langdon-Down,

It is very strange to be back here once more, but excellent that one can set to work with all one's energies at last. I have spent most of my time interviewing tutors and authorities, and clearing the ground for decisions about courses and exams. As the ground does seem clear now I thought I would write and let you know just how things stand, as I should value your advice.

There are two alternatives before me. Owing to war statutes and other accommodations it is now possible to take a degree in medicine here without taking an arts degree as well. I might do this and go through the routine of physiology, anatomy and organic chemistry. I ought to clear that up and get to hospital by Jan 1921, possibly taking a war degree in arts, which would have little more than sentimental value.



Russell Brain.

On the other hand, I might take an honours degree (arts) in physiology combining with it the ordinary anatomy and organic chemistry courses. This would take till June 1921. My tutor, Mr Walden, a chemistry man, has a sound grip of the situation and, as he says, it all depends on one's aims. For my purposes he advocates the latter. The only point in favour of the former is speed. He sent me to see Sir W^m Osler this morning to ask him whether my conjoint biology could be used to exempt me from the same exam here. This Sir William, who is the Regius Professor, hopes to be able to arrange. My tutor also wanted me to find out whether the medical student's exemption from an arts degree still holds good. Sir William, however, advocated the honours course in physiology. He was extremely pleasant, asked me to tea on Sunday week and said I might go at any time and see him if I wanted to ask him anything. . . .

Talk over tea

Cushing's biography of Osler describes a tea party held on 26 January 1919, the "Sunday week" after the Saturday on which the letter of 18 January was written by Russell Brain and the day of the

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party to which he was invited and therefore may have attended, as he was later to state that he had been a guest at his house:

"The sort of thing which customarily went on at 13 Norham Gardens may be gathered from a sojourner's letter of the time, describing a Sunday afternoon when

'... there was the usual inpouring of visitors. A young South African back from the war—a Rhodes Scholar—very much at home—was abused for not bringing his brother who was said to be too shy to come. "Just the place for him here", said WO; "this is a School for Shyness." Countless young men in and out of uniform—VADs from Canada and New Zealand—Sir Almroth Wright, Dreyer, the Sherringtons and the Somervilles—Miss Smart the new secretary, greatly impressed and excited about her position—young Capt Ferris just off the American troopship *Narragansett* which went aground Saturday off the Isle of Wight with 2500 aboard (Lady O had spent most of the morning trying to get in communication with his mother)—Marion Emmons, the "two Sues," Willie Francis and many more....'

Probably few of these many visitors realized that he (Osler) had spent a busy Sunday morning at the Radcliffe Infirmary making his usual ward visit there with a group of graduate physicians; but chance has it that a record of this particular January 26th has been left in one of the very last of his clinical papers, which happens to deal with a subject concerning his own story."³

Was it at this Sunday tea party that William Osler asked Russell Brain to make the selections for the chapter that Osler had been asked to write? Unfortunately, no letters have been found that recount Russell Brain's impressions of the party he probably attended, an occasion that must have been commented on by such a conscientious letter writer. There is therefore no record in either the Osler or the Brain papers of what led William Osler to make this request or of the occasion at which it was made.

Silent and shy

Whatever the occasion, William Osler must have broken through the seeming aloofness that characterised Russell Brain's initial contact with people. Sir George Pickering once wrote of him: "Those who sat next to him at a dinner, accompanied him on an expedition or participated with him at a social event, became accustomed to his 'formidable silences'. Some have attributed these to shyness."⁴ Osler's "School for Shyness" at 13 Norham Gardens may have been just the place for Russell Brain on this occasion. W W Francis's presence at Oxford in 1919 probably accounts for the notation he made in Osler's copy of the article that was subsequently transferred to the library at McGill with the rest of Osler's papers.

The task of preparing the chapter was carried out expeditiously, for in a letter to his future father in law written on 18 April 1919 Russell Brain wrote:

"I finished the Osler article about a week ago and had an acknowledgment today from the man who is editing the book in which it is to appear. He seems pleased with it and has submitted it to Osler for him to make any alterations he wishes. I shall be interested to hear what Osler thinks of it and whether he alters it much. The situation strikes me as humorous—a first year medical student selecting from Osler's pronouncements those which he deems most suitable to express the ideals of the profession to others!"

The material selected included edited excerpts from the following

chapters in *Aequanimitas*: Doctor and nurse, Chauvinism in medicine, The level of science, Teaching and thinking, and Nurse and patient. Some of the passages chosen from *Aequanimitas* had also been included in *Counsels and Ideals*, a book of extracts from Osler's writings selected by C N B Camac and published in 1905. The editing consisted of the omission of sentences, the correction of a split infinitive, and linking passages that cannot be found in either book. To what extent Osler changed the manuscript that the editor of *Essays on Vocations* forwarded to him for his approval is not known.

No acknowledgment

Russell Brain seems to have made no mention of his collaboration with Osler in subsequent references to his contact with him. He started his Osler Oration to the Canadian Medical Association in 1960: "As one who knew Osler, and as a guest in his house, felt his friendly arm around my shoulders. . . ." Perhaps the task was too trivial, or perhaps the audacity of the assignment to a medical student in the first few weeks of his studies was such that acknowledgment that it had been undertaken was not thought to be appropriate. Nevertheless, it is indicative of the rapport that William Osler could establish with a shy student, whose subsequent career in medicine and literature would have been difficult then to predict. It also shows the opportunities that William Osler's renowned hospitality at 13 Norham Gardens gave for social contact between his many guests, both the famous and the young. Cushing's biography describes the hectic nature of Osler's life at that time, with his multitude of interests, his clinical and administrative responsibilities, and his attempts to restore a semblance of order to a medical world disrupted by the aftermath of the war all undertaken despite the emotional consequences of the tragic death of his son in action in 1917.

Russell Brain decided not to take the advice of either his tutor or of Sir William Osler and chose not to spend the additional year at Oxford for the honours physiology course. He was 24 in 1919 and engaged to be married, so he decided to leave Oxford in June 1920, having taken a first class BM and been awarded the Theodore Williams' Scholarship in physiology. He went on to start his clinical studies at The London Hospital, where he was later to pursue his distinguished career as a neurologist.

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References

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- 2 Abbott ME, ed. *Sir William Osler memorial number. Appreciations and reminiscences*. Montreal: International Association of Medical Museums, 1926:591. (Bulletin No IX.)
- 3 Cushing H. *The life of Sir William Osler*. Vol 2. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925:633-4.
- 4 Pickering GW. Walter Russell Brain, first Baron Brain of Eynsham, 1895-1966, elected FRS 1964. *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society* 1968;14:75.
- 5 Brain WR. Osler and medicine today. *Can Med Assoc J* 1960;83:349.